

Early Music 101

Pitch – The frequency of a *musical note* or tone, whether played by a plucked string, wind blown into a pipe, or sung. If you double the frequency of a musical note, you go up one octave.

Scale – A scale is a group of eight musical notes or *itches* arranged in ascending order. Think about the song in *The Sound of Music* where the children learn how to sing a scale: “do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do.” The first “do” is called the *tonic note* or the *root* – the first note in the scale. The second “do” is an octave (i.e., eight notes) above the first “do.”

Key – This refers to a scale’s *tonic note* (e.g., C) and its related triad chord (e.g., C+E+G). The scale of the key of C then becomes C,D,E,F,G,A,B,c – where the lower case “c” is one octave above “C,” i.e. Middle C.

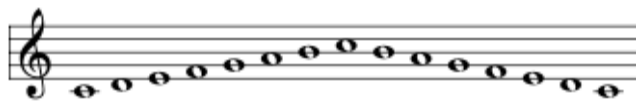


Figure 1 shows how the ascending and descending scale is written in the key of C Major

Figure 1 The scale written in the key of C Major.

Thirds and Fifths – These are important pairs of musical notes played at the same time. You can think of a third as “do + me” (e.g., C + E) and a fifth as “do + sol” (e.g., C + G).

Chords – A *chord* is any harmonic set of three or more notes that is played at the same time. A *triad chord* consists of three notes, for example, “do + me + sol.” A triad chord can be major or minor depending on whether “me” (the third) is *natural* or *flat* = lowered. Figure 2 shows how a *C major chord* is written. If you play a triad of “re + fa + la” (i.e., D + F + A) in the key of C, that triad is a *minor triad chord*.



Figure 2 A C Major chord (the tonic, C, is in red and is doubled at the octave.)

Mode – At the turn of the 5th to 4th century BCE, the ancient Greeks developed a system of arranging eight notes in eight different ways, called *modes*. Figure 3 shows one of those modes, the Phrygian. It is thought that the Greek modes were eight different ways to tune a lyre.

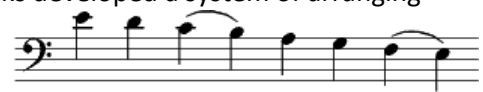


Figure 3 The eight notes of the Phrygian Mode, written in a descending sequence

Greek theorists conceived of scales from higher pitch to lower (the opposite of modern practice). In the early days of the Catholic Church, the clergy used modes for singing psalms and chants. They called them *church modes* and called their chants *Gregorian Chants*, named after Saint Gregory I, who was the Pope from 590-604 A.D. Our familiar major and minor *scales* were not formalized until the time of J.S. Bach, over 1000 years later.

Melody – A pleasing sequence of musical notes that form the main part of a song or piece of music. It is also known as a *melodic line*.

Voice or Part – This refers to which singer (or group) sings a specific melodic line, or what musical instrument plays it. In the early Middle Ages, there was only one *voice*, one *melody* or chant. By the late Middle Ages, composers started experimenting with multiple voices singing simultaneously. We often refer to those voices as *parts*. Early music began with a lower or *tenor part* and one or more

higher *parts*. Different composers gave those parts various names; naming conventions were not standardized until later. By the Baroque, a lot of music was written for four voices: *soprano*, *alto*, *tenor*, and *bass parts*. Festive choruses could have eight or more parts.

Monophony – Music with just one *voice*, such as *Gregorian Chant* (usually sung in Latin). Think of your cantor or priest chanting a psalm or prayer with no accompaniment. When sung by multiple voices in *unison* (i.e. the same pitch), this music is still considered *monophonic*.

Monody – A solo song accompanied by one or more instruments. For example, the accompaniment for the vocal soloist could be chords or a sequence of related notes on a lute.

Polyphony – Music consisting of two or more *voices* singing or playing lines of independent melody at the same time. In early music, the upper *voice* was generally created by the composer, while the lower *voice* (generally called the *tenor*) was usually based on a familiar chant or song.

Motet – A type of *polyphonic* musical composition for choirs that uses a fixed pattern of *itches* with a repeating rhythmic pattern that is based on the words of the verse. Originally, only the tenors would sing the verse in a rhythmic pattern; later, those rhythmic patterns were repeated in all voices.

Counterpoint – This refers to the “horizontal” aspect of music composition: the interweaving of two or more melodic lines by two or more *voices* in a pleasing manner. The study and practice of counterpoint sets forth the rules by which those melodic lines are related.


Fugue – (from the Latin “fugere” – to flee or “fugare” - to chase). This is an elaborate style of composition in two or more *voices*. The first theme, called the *subject* is introduced with one voice at the beginning, and then the other voices repeat the subject at different *itches*. When each voice has entered, the first section (called the *exposition*) is complete, and it is then followed by a connecting passage called an *episode*, developed from previously heard material. Expositions and episodes usually alternate until the final entry of the subject, followed by closing material called a *coda* (Latin for “tail”).

Harmony – In music, *harmony* is the use of simultaneous pitches or chords. It refers to the “vertical” aspect of music composition. Think of a barbershop quartet, patriotic song, or hymn. The Latin Christmas hymn in Figure 4, *Adeste Fideles*, is written in *four part harmony*. See how the notes line up vertically.

Chorale – Originally, a Lutheran hymn intended to be sung by the laity. The words are often sung to a rhyming scheme and use the same melody for different verses.

Adeste Fideles

Latin 18th century John F. Wade



The image shows a musical score for the Latin Christmas hymn 'Adeste Fideles'. It is written in 4/4 time and G major. The score consists of four staves: a soprano line, an alto line, a tenor line, and a basso continuo line. The lyrics are written below the vocal lines, with three parts: 1. A - des - te, fi - del - es, Lae - ti tri - um - phan - tes, 2. Can - tet nunc i - o, cho - rus an - gel - or - um; 3. Er - go qui nat - us di - e ho - di - er - na. The notes in each staff are aligned vertically to show the four-part harmony.

Figure 4 An example of four part harmony.

Mass – The central worship service in the Catholic Church. The mass has fixed parts (called the “ordinary”) and parts that change with the seasons (called the “proper”). High Mass is sung, generally on important holidays, while Low Mass is usually recited without music. By the late Baroque, some elaborate masses were not used for worship services at all – they were reserved for concerts.

Matins and Vespers – Matins are prayers chanted by priests, monks, or nuns during the night, while vespers are their evening prayers. During the early Renaissance, vespers were often considered as important as the mass.

A Cappella – (Italian for “in the manner of the church or chapel”) Music sung by soloists or groups without instrumental accompaniment. It contrasts with *cantata*, which is accompanied singing.

Cantata – (from the Latin “cantare” – to sing) A choral composition for one or more voices usually comprising solos, duets, recitatives, and choruses and sung to an instrumental accompaniment. A cantata usually has a religious subject.

Chanson – A *polyphonic* French song for two to four voices, usually based on popular poetry. Chansons were popular in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Canzona – An early instrumental work composed in a similar manner to a chanson.

Madrigal – An unaccompanied, secular vocal music composition of the Renaissance and early Baroque eras. Madrigals reached the height of their popularity in the second half of the 16th century. Some were happy and simple, while others expressed deep human emotions.

Canon – A *simple canon* (also known as a round) is a song in which one or more *parts* imitate the leader perfectly at the octave or unison. Well-known simple canons include the children's songs *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* and *Frère Jacques*. Canons were popular musical forms (both secular and religious) during the Renaissance; later, they became increasingly elaborate. Figure 5 illustrates the beginning of a *motet canon*, “Out of the depths I cry to Thee...” by Josquin Des Prez in the late 15th century. “De profundis” is repeated by each voice.

Figure 5 A 15th century motet canon. “De Profundis...”

Sonata – (from the Latin “sonare” – to sound). A Baroque sonata is an extended instrumental work in several movements, usually in the same key. There were two different types of sonatas: *the sonata da*

camera based on suites of popular dances, and the *sonata da chiesa* or church sonata, reserved for religious festivities.

Recitative – A style of singing without a fixed rhythm that imitates speech (usually a “talking” introduction that is sung rather than spoken). In opera, it carries out the dialogue, and in religious works such as oratorios and cantatas, it uses free verse to introduce a choral piece. Think of “Behold, I tell you a mystery...” the introduction to the bass aria, “The trumpet shall sound!” in Handel’s *Messiah*.

Aria – The standard aria form in the 17th century was known as the “da capo aria”, where “da capo” (in Latin, “from the head”) means “repeat this section from the beginning.” The first or “A” section introduces the aria, the second or “B” section elaborates on it, and the final or “A” section is repeated, but with extra ornamentation meant to show off the vocal prowess of the singer.

Arioso – A solo vocal piece that falls somewhere between a recitative and an aria. It follows the non-rhythmic speech pattern of the verse; it has a melodic line like an aria; but the melody is not repeated.

Concerto – An instrumental composition, generally in three movements, in which a solo instrument is contrasted with the rest of the ensemble. Think of a piano concerto.

Concerto Grosso – A popular Baroque composition similar to a *concerto*, but instead of featuring a solo instrument, it contrasts a small group of instruments with the larger orchestra.

Fantasia – A festive work that featured a single instrument or group of instruments, giving the impression that it was freely improvised. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with *capriccio*, *voluntary*, *fanfare*, and *toccata*. It has nothing to do with Walt Disney’s movie, “Fantasia.”

Renaissance Dance Music – Popular instrumental dance music flourished throughout the Renaissance and was composed or improvised by many people. These dance forms were the precursors of Baroque instrumental music, including *suites* and *partitas*.

Suite – A *suite* is a type of instrumental dance music that emerged during the Renaissance and was further developed during the Baroque Period. It consists of several movements or short pieces (dance forms) in the same key, functioning as dance music or dining music during social gatherings. By the time of J.S. Bach, *suites* were usually composed of four main movements: *allemande*, *courante*, *sarabande* and *gigue*.

Partita – A musical composition for a single instrument, usually based on a set of dance forms.

Early Musical Instruments – Early musical instruments like those in Figure 6 were basically divided into four groups: *strings* (plucked like a lute or bowed like a violin), *woodwinds* with or without reeds (flutes, oboes, recorders, etc.), *brasswinds* (trumpets, sackbuts, cornets, etc.), and *percussion instruments* like drums and tambourines. There were also keyboard instruments such as harpsichords (which plucked strings), clavichords (which pressed strings), and organs (large and small).



Figure 6 Early musical instruments.